

## I Am Because You Are

UBUNTU architecture team makes plans with South Africans

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The 2016 UBUNTU Design Group project team in Durban, South Africa, gathering information with the local residents.

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Wandile Mthiyane is the founder of [UBUNTU Design Group](#), a project he started to aid informal and peri-urban settlements in South Africa. He grew up in the [shantytowns](#) of Durban, South Africa, and dreamed of returning in order to improve and develop that community. His dream came closer to reality when the eThekweni Municipality afforded him the chance to attend Andrews University and connect with similar-minded peers. His desire to assist those in his hometown merged with his interests in architecture, leading to the creation of UBUNTU Design Group, which began as his master's project. Mthiyane presented his "Half-House Project" in Bangkok, Thailand, at the [One Young World](#) Resolution Project summit, where he was awarded a fellowship and also the necessary funding to get UBUNTU Design Group off the ground.

An important aspect of UBUNTU Design Group is that it does not underestimate the residents of informal settlements.

“We believe people in informal settlements are some of the most creative and wonderful people,” said Mthiyane. “The problem is that when organizations try to help or bring aid they have preconceived ideas that people cannot help themselves.”

Instead, UBUNTU Design Group attempts to help the locals help themselves, primarily through assisting them in developing innovations in architecture that will lead them to create inexpensive, long-lasting and culturally authentic homes for their own communities. The most important idea, however, remains that the locals are empowered themselves, which is why the group is named UBUNTU, a word that, in the local language, conveys the idea “I am because you are.”

One of UBUNTU Design Group’s members is Stephen Allcock, a senior documentary film major at Andrews, who has a passion for culture and storytelling. His senior project is a story about Mthiyane and his work.

“I love seeing how people can be empowered to change the world around them by having people show an interest in understanding their culture,” Allcock said, “That is, genuinely wanting to help—not for glorification but to see people’s lives change for the better.”

Mthiyane stated that the people living in “shantytowns” are often those hired to build stadiums for the world cup.

“Everyone is an architect but they don’t have the resources to be able to grow,” he comments.

Allcock added that many residents are already recycling materials in order to build these shantytowns. What Ubuntu Design Groups aims to accomplish is harness those skills to help them build their own houses, rather than instructing them how to build in a way that is inauthentic to them.

“People from South Africa see themselves as an extension of their geography,” explained Mthiyane. “Once we remove them and put them in what we call ‘development’ here in the West, we’ve removed them from their land but also from who they are and from their culture. That often doesn’t work.”

Allcock affirmed, “We don’t want the local community to lose their shared values and community spirit; it’s a natural creative community spirit that exists.”

Not to mention that oftentimes the work done by organizations doesn’t last, instead becoming rundown again after 10 or 20 years.

“Cookie cutter houses aren’t accustomed to climate, and have a short lifespan. Those same people move back into shantytowns,” Mthiyane commented.

Allcock summarized the challenge that UBUNTU Design Group faces: “How do we as UBUNTU raise the architectural standards and create houses that are up to code and fire safe but using the methods of the people that already exist?”

UBUNTU Design Group methods include developing the individual skills that community members possess; some can lay brick, while others can do stucco. However, as Allcock points out, “Everyone is trying to take care of themselves, and there’s a huge missed opportunity for sharing skills.”

The first step, then, is to make sure these people are provided for.

“A house doesn’t pay the bills or bring food to the table,” Mthiyane said, which means developing the informal settlements into agriculturally self-sustaining communities is vital. Next, UBUNTU Design Group can connect locals with mentors who can train them for a year, giving them access to resources and support vital to their training.

Last year at a One Young World conference, the CEO and founder of [World Merit](#), Chris Arnold, approached Mthiyane and asked him to come to an event called [Merit 360](#) in 2016, indicating that it would be a great platform to pitch the idea to the United Nations.

“A few weeks ago, three hundred young leaders from across the globe flew into New York for the opportunity of a lifetime,” says Mthiyane. The young people put together solutions and action plans that would then be used to meet the United Nations’ sustainable development goals. “What was even more exciting,” continues Mthiyane, “was the fact that we also got to pitch these ideas to the [United Nations’ Youth envoy](#) and other important delegates.”

Because of the community-oriented nature of this project, the establishment of partnerships, particularly with local people, is of paramount importance.

“It has been really thrilling to see the amount of eagerness and excitement from various local entities who are willing to assist in order to see this project become a success,” says Mthiyane.

Some of these partnerships include the local Seventh-day Adventist Church leadership; the local leadership of Umbumbulu, headed by the king; the local eThekweni municipality, with Dudu Ngubane being the chief liaison; the architectural departments of the local universities, [Durban University of Technology](#) and [University of Kwazulu-Natal](#); and of course the families that will be assisted in this project.

Ultimately, the strength of UBUNTU Design Group’s vision lies in its co-dependence with the people it hopes to assist.

“‘I am because you are,’” quotes Mthiyane. “We can only succeed if you do. We exist because of each other.” He continues, “One of the main reasons for this organization is because of values we’ve learned at Andrews. Our vision aligns with Seek Knowledge, Affirm Faith, Change the World. Jesus spent half his ministry feeding people and the other part preaching. We want to be the hands and feet.”

Allcock also related how UBUNTU Design Group has had several opportunities to interact with organizations and governments that normally wouldn’t encounter an Adventist-led project.

“Because we bring God into how we interact, it provides a ministry opportunity unlike any other,” he says.

“We believe these people have God-given intrinsic value,” added Mthiyane. He described how Apartheid drove people who wanted to remain close to resources in cities but couldn’t afford to live in them to live in informal settlements, sharing the conditions they endure today. “But they have value and we need to help them regain that dignity. God gives them strength and they can do anything. They just need the resources and the training.”

The group’s first goal currently is aiding a man who is disabled because of a car accident, which necessitates making his home disabled-friendly and with a shop front in it for his business.

To help UBUNTU Design Group in their work, visit [ubuntudesigngroup.com](http://ubuntudesigngroup.com) to donate or get involved.

“Beyond money, as important as that is, we’re looking for a network of people who can get onboard with this dream,” Mthiyane stated.

## **Related Links**

- [UBUNTU Design Group projects](#)
- [Like UBUNTU on Facebook](#)
- [Watch a video of UBUNTU presented at the United Nations](#)
- [How to get involved](#)

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